

U.S. Savage Imperialism, Part 3

Part three of a Z Media Institute talk, June 2010

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By **Noam Chomsky**

In parts one and two of "U.S. Savage Imperialism," Chomsky talks about the U.S. global mission and the Mideast with particular regard to Iran and Israel/Palestine. He closes by speculating on whether, with world pressure, the U.S. might shift its policy and insist on Israel accepting the international consensus on a two-state solution. What follows is a transcript of the first group of questions asked by the students attending Z Media Institute 2010.



Q: Can you talk about Egypt's role in supporting the siege of Gaza and also about the steel wall it's building?

CHOMSKY: You're quite right that Egypt has been complicit in Israel's savage siege of Gaza. Actually, Egypt is more frightened by Hamas than Israel is. Egypt is a brutal dictatorship, strongly supported by President Obama who has said straight out that he's not going to criticize them because Egypt helps us maintain stability in the Middle East. That's why nobody in the Middle East with a brain functioning can take Obama seriously when he talks about human rights.

But Egypt's very worried because if they ever allowed anything remotely like a democratic election, there's a popular force in Egypt which could turn into a majority—namely the Muslim Brotherhood. And the U.S. supports them in that. Hamas is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt was horrified by their popular victory in Palestine. Egypt also understands U.S./Israeli policy, which is not very obscure. The U.S. and Israel want to throw Gaza, which has been virtually

destroyed by the Israelis, into the hands of Egypt. Israel doesn't want it, the U.S. doesn't want it. They can't just kill everybody the way they could in the 19th century because you couldn't get away with it now. So the idea is to keep the population in Gaza barely alive, to abandon any responsibility for them, and to toss them into the hands of Egypt, which doesn't want them. For that reason, and because of the fact that they're ruled by an offshoot of the Muslim brotherhood, Egypt has been participating in the siege.

They are, as you said, also building a wall—apparently with U.S. engineering support—to seal off the country totally, partly just to increase the savagery of the siege, but also partly to confound U.S./Israeli policy of attempting to toss Gaza into Egypt's hands, which they don't want.

I've been interested in Israel's motivations for the Gaza attack. Norman Finkelstein has written that it was to restore Israel's deterrence capacity. I wonder if you agree with his thesis and his position that Israel at some point must suffer a military defeat, possibly at the hands of Hezbollah.

I think Finkelstein has a case. Israel was defeated in 2006 and they need to maintain a posture of invincibility after being so terrible harmed. Maybe they thought by smashing up Gaza, they could restore it, but I don't know exactly who they thought they were impressing. To show that an advanced modern army can destroy a totally defenseless population which can't even fire a pistol in response is not a very impressive demonstration of deterrence capacity.



They know that they can stop the rocket attacks, but to do so would mean accepting an agreement with Hamas and providing some legitimacy for the elected government in Palestine. And they don't want to provide any legitimacy. It can't be tolerated. They've got most of the cabinet in prison, in

fact. They want to destroy it as an independent force.

What about a military defeat? I was in Lebanon recently and I talked to some of the

leading Western Middle East correspondents. Some of them have been based there for decades so they know the region very well. The most knowledgeable of them expect a war. In fact, they think both Israel and Hezbollah want a war. Israel wants a war so it can show it really can destroy Lebanon—it won't be beaten, as it was last time. And if Israel, with U.S. backing, decides to attack Iran, as might happen, they have to destroy Lebanon first because Lebanon has deterrence capacity—namely Hezbollah.

So they may attack and there could be a war and the two of them will destroy each other. It could happen soon. States don't necessarily act rationally and Israel is becoming extremely irrational, paranoid, and ultra-nationalist. Take the attack on the flotilla. It was a completely irrational act. If they wanted to they could have easily disabled the boats. Attacking a Turkish-flagged ship and killing Turks is about the craziest thing they could do from a strategic point of view. Turkey has been their one close regional ally since 1958. Attacking your one regional ally for absolutely no reason is a kind of insanity. And they've done it before. Earlier, Israel had purposely humiliated the Turkish ambassador in a manner that I don't think has a precedent in diplomatic history. That's pretty irrational.

They claim there's an existential threat from Iran, but according to the U.S. strategic analysis, the threat is that Iran doesn't obey orders and is a deterrent to Israel's efforts at regional dominance. But if the Israelis fool themselves into thinking Iran is an existential threat, the outcome of that you can't even think of.

It's not that Iran is that rational either. There's a possible conflict brewing in the region, which is really frightening to think about. As you may know, Iran has announced that it intends to send ships to break the Gaza blockade. If that happened, all bets are off. Israel could go berserk. It's a powerful state with hundreds of nuclear weapons. They could decide to destroy the region and destroy themselves in the process. Who knows. It's scary.

Israel has a doctrine that goes back to the 1950s. They sometimes call it the Samson Complex, named after the most respected and honored suicide bomber in the world. Samson was a famous hero who killed a lot of Philistines. As the



story goes, Delilah cut off his hair and he lost his strength and the Philistines captured and blinded



him. But his hair grew back and he regained his strength. He was in the temple surrounded by thousands of Philistines when he pulled down the temple walls and killed himself and more Philistines in his death than in his lifetime.

The Samson Complex means if the world presses Israel too far, they will go crazy and bring down the temple walls. Of course, they'll be killed too. This attitude is part of the national psyche and it's expanding now. And it's not a joke. It could happen.

Talk about Netanyahu's attempt to crush left dissidents.

It's not just Netanyahu. It's blamed on him, but it is the national mood, which is shifting very far to the ultra-nationalist right. Take a look at the polls. The national mood is paranoid. Part of it is the feeling that Israel has to crush any attempt to question the legitimacy and magnificence of what they are doing. This change in the country in the last few years is dramatic.

When the international community asks for an independent investigation, who are these investigators and do they have any legitimacy at all?

Most of what's going on doesn't get reported. But a couple of days ago, there was an important meeting of what we call the international community—which means the United States and anybody who happens to agree with us. Maybe the whole world disagrees, but then they're against the international community. I'm not joking. Take the idea that the international community is calling on Iran to stop enriching uranium. You read that everywhere. Exactly who is this international community? It's not the non-aligned countries, which are most of the world. They vigorously support Iran's right to enrich uranium, so they can't be part of the international community.

A couple of years ago the majority of Americans agreed with them. So the majority of Americans also aren't part of the international community because the international community is Washington and whoever happens to be going along with it.



president of Brazil at the time, advocating a similar deal, probably because Obama believed that Iran would never agree and then he'd be able to refer to the letter and say, well, we tried and they wouldn't do it. But Iran did agree and the U.S. instantly reacted by ramming through a UN Security Council resolution, which is so weak that China and Russia agreed to it instantly. If you read the terms of the resolution—which was passed and praised here—if you look at the small print, it does almost nothing. Its only effect is to transfer to China even greater control over Iran's resources. So China's happy with it.

Russia's happy with it because it permits them to sell all the arms they want to Iran. But the U.S. had to ram the resolution through to make the world know who's boss. Not Brazil and Turkey. Turkey is the most important regional power, with a long border with Iran. So they're not allowed to be boss. Brazil is the most important, most respected country in the South, so they can't be boss. In fact, if you read the *New York Times*, the headlines say that there's a "spot on Lula's legacy" for standing up to the U.S. Today there's a report quoting some high level official saying, we've got to do something to make sure Turkey stays in line.

That's kind of like the Mafia. You have to make sure nobody interferes with your right to control everything. So the U.S. rams through an almost meaningless UN resolution to block a Turkish/Brazilian initiative which could have made some progress.

The relevant part of the international community is actually the Asian security system, CICA—I think. It includes most of the Asian states—China, India, Iran, Israel, and so on. They had a security meeting and decided strongly to call for an international investigation into Israel's attack on the flotilla. The rules of the organization, however, require consensus. Of course, Israel didn't agree so the vote was 22-1, or something close to that. Therefore, the group made a separate

It was pretty striking what happened in the last couple of weeks about this. Turkey and Brazil made a deal with Iran, which was pretty similar to what the U.S. had proposed. They would arrange for uranium to be enriched outside of Iran and then return it to them for medical purposes. It turns out that Obama had written a letter to Lula, the

declaration calling for an international investigation. Obama immediately blocked that Security Council resolution calling for an independent investigation and the Asian security organization was blocked out of the media. So it didn't happen, except that it did happen.

International relations theory doesn't amount to much. There are some principles. Probably one of the most important is the Mafia principle. The Godfather does not accept disobedience. A small storekeeper somewhere who doesn't pay protection money can't get away with it. Maybe you don't even need the money, but if one storekeeper gets away with it, somebody else will get the idea and pretty soon the system erodes. So you don't just send in your goons to get the money, you send them to beat them to a pulp so everybody gets the idea. That's how international affairs works. Sometimes it's called the domino theory or some other thing. But you look at case after case and it constantly works like that.



Does it mean anything that Turkey is in NATO and Israel attacked a Turkish ship in International waters?

There's some debate about technically how the ship was flagged, but if it was a Turkish flagged ship, as was claimed, that means it's Turkish territory. Under maritime law, a ship in waters is part of the territory of the country that flags it. There is a NATO treaty that requires NATO powers to go to the assistance of any NATO country under attack. So, if treaties meant anything, which, of course, they don't, the NATO countries, led by the United States, should have immediately gone to the support of the Turkish ship. If an Iranian ship had attacked a NATO vessel, probably Iran would have been blown off the face of the earth.

You mentioned this boss who says what can happen and what can't as a model of the way nation states work. Other times don't you have to look at economic classes instead? How does that work?

That's an interesting question and Iran is a very interesting case. There are a couple

of principles of international affairs and all of them are missing from international relations theory. As I mentioned, one of these is the Mafia principle: another traces back to Adam Smith. We're supposed to worship Adam Smith, but we're not supposed to read him. That's much too dangerous. He's nowhere near the crazed capitalist lunatic that's constructed in ideology. He's a pretty sensible guy. Smith pointed out that in England—I'm quoting him—"the principle architects of policy are the merchants and manufacturers," the people who own the economy. And they make sure that "their own interests are most peculiarly attended to" no matter how "grievous" to the people of England, let alone others who were subjected to, what he called, "the savage injustice of the Europeans."

Sometimes these principles conflict and those cases are important for the study of policy formation. With Iran, for example, the major economic forces would be pretty happy to have the U.S. normalize relations with Iran. The U.S. energy corporations are not delighted that China is picking up all the goodies. But state policy requires that we give Iran's resources to China over the objections of U.S. energy corporations, which usually have a crucial impact on policy making.

That's the conflict between two doctrines: the Mafia doctrine and the Adam Smith doctrine. In this case, the Mafia doctrine wins. It's striking—if you look over the history, you find that the very same individuals will make different decisions depending on whether they are running a corporation or running the government. The same people who are making the decisions about Iran—let's give the resources to China—if they were still running their energy corporations, they'd make the opposite decision. They now have an institutional role in state policy, which is different from the role of the CEO of a corporation. The CEOs of corporations have an institutional role as well—to maximize profits. It's a legal requirement and if they don't do it, they're out and someone else comes in who will do it. The role of the same individual in, for example, the state department or the Pentagon is to consider the long-term consequences of policy choices that sometimes conflict with the parochial interests of a particular sector of the economy. So what you get is a conflict and, in Iran's case, the Mafia principle wins. The same individuals who might have run oil companies, now must decide that for the long-term goal of controlling the Middle East, it's necessary to take positions which, in fact, harm the energy corporations.

Iran is not the only case. U.S. policy toward Cuba is quite interesting to study for understanding international relations theory. For 50 years, ever since Cuban

independence, the U.S. has been attacking and punishing the people of Cuba. And we know exactly why. The documents are all out. You have to punish the people of Cuba—this is Kennedy, Eisenhower, and so on—because Cuba isn't following orders. They are carrying out what the Kennedy and Johnson administrations called "successful defiance" of U.S. policies going back to the Monroe Doctrine, which said the U.S. runs the hemisphere.

Meanwhile, for decades the large majority of the U.S. population has been in favor of normalizing relations with Cuba. The rest of the world is totally opposed to U.S. policy towards Cuba. Just take a look at the UN Assembly votes every year. It's the *World v. the United States*—and the Marshall Islands or something. That's not unusual. What's striking in this case is that major sections of American business are also opposed. That includes energy, pharmaceutical, and agricultural corporations. They all want to normalize relation with Cuba. Following the Adam Smith principle, you'd expect them to determine policy, but it's overridden by the Mafia principle .

If you really want to study international affairs, those are the cases you should look at. Just as, if you want to understand U.S. Cold War policy, you should look at what happened in 1990. But those are exactly the topics that are off the agenda. You don't study them in graduate school, there's no academic literature about them, there's no commentary about them. They're just too revealing.

Incidentally, it's not the first time in the case of Iran. In 1953, when the U.S. and Britain overthrew the parliamentary regime and installed the Shah, the U.S. government wanted U.S. oil companies to take 40 percent of the British concession. It was part of the long-term U.S. policy of edging the British out of the Middle East and taking over and turning them into a junior partner. The oil companies didn't want to do it for short-term reasons. It turned out that there was an oil glut at the time and if they took over the Iranian concession, they would have to reduce their liftings in Saudi Arabia, which was much more important for them. But they were compelled by the government to take it. They were even threatened with anti-trust penalties, so they followed orders. In this case, long-term concerns about the control of oil overrode the specific parochial interest of the architects of policy.

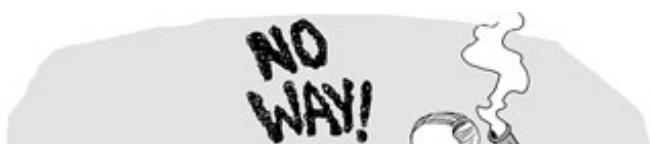
I should mention that during the Second World War there was a kind of mini-war going on between Britain and the U.S. over control of Middle East oil, mainly in

Saudi Arabia. It was understood by the 1930s that it was the real prize, the jewel in the crown. Britain wanted to keep it and the U.S. wanted to take it away. So there was a battle going on—we have the documents—and, of course, the U.S. won. Britain was in dire straits at the time, so the U.S. took over Saudi Arabia.

At the end of the war, the British understood that their role as the international hegemon was essentially over and the foreign office recognized that they would have to be what they called "junior" partners of the U.S. They had no illusions about what the U.S. was up to: they said, the U.S. is taking over the world under the pretext of benevolence, but they're just after power and we have no choice, except to be junior partners.

The U.S. treats them with total contempt and Britain just takes it. The most striking case was during the 1962 missile crisis. U.S. leaders—the Kennedys—were making decisions which they understood could lead to the destruction of England and all of Europe. They were pushing things to the point where there might be a Russian retaliation and they weren't telling the British about it. In fact, Harold Macmillan, the prime minister, didn't know what was going on, but tried desperately to find out. At one point, one of Kennedy's senior advisers—probably Dean Acheson—defined what he called the "special relationship" between the U.S. and Britain, which he said means that "Britain is our lieutenant—the fashionable word is 'partner'."

Of course, Britain has a choice. They could be part of the Eurozone, but they prefer to be a junior partner and think of themselves as independent actors in world affairs. Of course, Europe, too, has choices and these have been a serious concern for U.S. policy since 1950. U.S. planners understood that there would be industrial recovery in Europe in the early post-war period. Once they do, they're a power on the scale of the United States with a large economy, a larger educated population, with a lot of advantages. They could become an independent force in world affairs—what is called a third force. That's a big danger. You can't run the world if there's a big independent force. A lot of efforts were meant to prevent that. One of them is NATO. Part of the goal of NATO was to ensure that Europe would remain a vassal under U.S. control.



What happened in 1990 is striking in this respect. If anybody believed the propaganda of the preceding 50



disband NATO. Is that what happened? No. NATO expanded in quite an interesting way. Gorbachev made an incredible concession. He agreed to let a unified Germany join NATO. If you think about it, that's pretty astonishing. Germany alone had virtually destroyed Russia a couple of times in the last century. Now Gorbachev was agreeing to let unified Germany join a hostile military alliance. Why did he do it? Because there was a quid pro quo. He made an agreement with the Bush (senior) administration that NATO would not expand "one inch to the East." It would not include East Germany and obviously nothing beyond it. Well, Gorbachev was naive. Bush was careful never to put the agreement on paper—we have a detailed scholarly record of this. Gorbachev made the stupid error of thinking he could make a gentleman's agreement with the U.S. Well, that's pretty stupid. The U.S. hadn't the slightest intention of living up to the agreement. And it didn't. So, of course, NATO expanded to the east and, under Clinton, right up to the Russian border—and even further.

NATO's official role now is to control the global energy system, the sea lanes, and pipelines. There was a conference in Washington recently led by former Secretary of State Albright, which outlined a global mission for NATO. The idea is that NATO should become a U.S.-run global intervention force. There's a conflict about this. The Europeans aren't all that happy about spending the money and the U.S. is charging them with being too non-violent and so on.

What happened with NATO is a dramatic illustration of the fact that all the propaganda of the Cold War was complete lies. NATO doesn't disappear when the Russian hordes are gone, it expands to make sure that Europe doesn't carry out that dangerous option of becoming an independent third force in world affairs.

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